



I N S T I T U T E

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Untangling The Web of Anger

By Charles C. Cummins, MS, LPC

In our increasingly fast paced world anger afflicts all of us on a personal, communal and world-wide level. Witness the current war on terrorism to see how anger manifested in one person, let alone a group or nation, can affect the entire world. Anger destroys personal relationships, divides groups and destabilizes a common goal.

From happiness to anger our culture views emotions as combinations of thoughts feelings, and behaviors. In Western culture, particular emphasis has traditionally been placed on the physiological and emotional aspects of anger and anger management. However, many cultures and a wave of new research is currently focusing on the brain as the source of emotions and the gateway to treating emotional disorders, pain and disease. For centuries Eastern philosophy has emphasized the mind in treating physical illness and destructive emotions. Increasingly, Western science has begun to study Eastern approaches and map the pathways that link emotion to health. Particular attention has been focused on the importance of *compassion* as a tool to counter anger. The practices of *meditation* and *mindfulness* have also been studied as skills to enhance the mind-body process and as healing practices to combat both emotional and physical afflictions. The challenge facing us is to put this ancient knowledge and new discoveries to work in helping us manage the anger and destructive emotions that increasingly plague our lives.

Research supports the effectiveness of cognitive/behavioral therapeutic approaches in managing anger. The creation of a cognitive shift in “philosophy” about anger supported by specific education that emphasizes *its effect on others* is essential. Meditation and mindfulness practice help develop mental and physical discipline that when practiced provide long term change in managing destructive emotions. Modern research is now revealing what Eastern medicine has practiced for centuries and is moving beyond the treatment of symptoms. Emerging is an integrated mind-body approach to healing that attempts to uproot the cause, the thinking, which is the source of afflictive emotions.

Imagine that anger is a diseased tree where anger and negative emotions surge through every root, bark, branch and leaf, much like anger affects us entirely. If we begin to trim away the diseased looking branches we may extend the trees life a little and it will

certainly look better. However, the entirety of the tree is still afflicted. Instead, would it not be more effective to teach someone how to uproot and eliminate their diseased tree or in this case, uproot and eliminate their anger? This can be accomplished through the development of compassion and an understanding of how our anger is self-harming and harmful to others.

Anger may give us a tremendous sense of power, but at the same time it undermines the happiness of others and ourselves. Anger acts like a parasite getting passed from person-to-person drawing energy from them while giving nothing in return. Anger has a way of distorting our assessment of reality and creates the illusion of clear thinking. Anger tends to reduce social interest and pushes other people away from us creating an unhealthy pattern of isolation. It fosters resentment and bitterness while breeding suspicion and continual unhappiness. When we are angry our thinking becomes black or white, and selective. There is a tendency to blame others when we're angry and to superimpose our distorted thinking on to others. Anger increases our blood pressure while releasing cortisol and adrenaline into our blood stream. Anger creates a "refractory period" closing us off from advice or anything that contradicts our view. Strangely enough, expressing anger rarely rids ourselves of it and only serves to strengthen the habit of acting it out. Most importantly, it is essential to realize that anger in our words and deeds is hurtful to others.

Compassion is a great antidote to anger and is described as a state of mind that is non-violent, non-harming, and non-aggressive. It is a mental attitude based on a wish for others to be free of suffering with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect towards others. As human beings we are essentially social and compassionate by nature. Anger tends to produce a line of movement that is contrary to this nature which is harmful to us and others. In Buddhism compassion or "tsewa," connotes that "I and others be free of suffering" and includes the concept of being compassionate to ones self. Compassion and its effect on health have been the focus of a great deal of research.

In studying compassion at Harvard University, the late David McClelland Ph.D. showed students a film of Mother Teresa administering aid. As students watched her compassionate work they reported increased positive feelings and their immune systems produced increased immunoglobulin-A, an antibody to fight respiratory infection. James House at the University of Michigan in a study on volunteer work found that compassionate acts, increase life expectancy and overall vitality. In a survey conducted by James House and Alan Luks at the University of California, Berkeley, people reported a "high" feeling after devoting their time to volunteer work. Acts of compassion have also been found to increase the Serotonin levels in not only those we help and in ourselves, but also in anyone who witnesses the compassionate act.

At the University of Wisconsin, Madison Richard Davidson has been conducting fascinating neurological research on the brain and emotion. In his state-of-the-art research Davidson has shown how the prefrontal lobes and limbic system of the brain allow us to mingle thought and feeling, cognition and emotion. Davidson's research has found that brain activity in the right prefrontal cortex is associated with distressing

emotions while emotions of happiness, enthusiasm, joy, alertness, and high energy generate activity in the left prefrontal cortex. Additional research by Richardson shows how compassionate thought and meditation practice generates not only an extremely pleasant mood, but also a shift in brain activity to the left prefrontal area. In other words, the person conducting compassionate acts or meditating on compassion is the initial beneficiary and the recipient of these acts or well wishes also benefit. Clearly, the development of compassionate thoughts and actions can extinguish the selfish mindedness of anger and provides a direct antidote to anger itself.

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice that has great relevance in our present-day lives. This relevance has little to do with Buddhism, but has everything to do with living in harmony with ones self and the world. In Western thinking, the practice of mindfulness can counterbalance our cultural orientation toward controlling and subduing nature. Buddhist mindfulness develops respect of our intimate role in nature. The presence of mindfulness is the presence of life.

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. It is the direct opposite of taking life for granted. It is a systematic process of self-observation, self-inquiry, and mindful action. The practice of mindfulness is gentle, appreciative, and nurturing. Mindfulness is practiced in order to build up concentration, attend to our thinking, and plant the seeds of compassion. Mindfulness in our daily lives frees us of forgetfulness, negativity and destructive thoughts.

Knowing how to breathe is essential to cultivating mindfulness. It is a natural and extremely effective way to prevent the scattered thinking and negativity associated with destructive emotions. Proper breathing is also essential to meditation practice.

In today's hectic world the mind frequently jumps around, like monkeys in the trees, with too many distracting thoughts. Proper breathing is the tool that can be used to tether the monkeys and keep them still. Through the breath you can bring calm to your mind and body. Opportunities to cultivate mindfulness can be found throughout our day such as in the quiet of early morning or when talking to your child. When doing the dishes, do the dishes only, when walking upstairs, focus on each step and breath. Be mindful when brushing your teeth, or when driving in traffic. Most importantly, be mindful of our emotions and responses to others.

The practice of meditation is nearly as old as humanity and has always been part of Eastern religions. In the West we are rediscovering this meditative past. This current interest is as much for medical reasons as it is cultural. Meditation is now being recommended by physicians as a way to prevent, slow, or control chronic diseases such as AIDS, cancer, and heart disease. It can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and increase our immune system. Meditation is an effective way to manage pain. Meditation is also widely used as a tool to combat psychological disturbances such as anxiety, depression, and attention deficit disorder. In our manic society, meditation has been found to be a particularly useful antidote to stress. Given that 60% of all doctor visits are the result of

stress-related conditions, fifteen minutes of daily meditation begins to sound like a time, money, and life saver. What is most exciting about the new research is how meditation can actually train and reshape the brain producing more long term change. Richard Davidson's sophisticated imaging techniques show how meditation practice can reset the brain or in reference to anger, can reset your boiling point.

Meditation develops physical and mental discipline that can help us manage the afflictive thought processes accompanying anger, destructive thoughts, and the distorted thinking that is symptomatic of mental disturbance. Fortunately, access to meditation practice in the form of books, centers, tapes, and internet are as varied as the types of meditation. Meditation is an incredible tool for developing compassion and mindfulness is a form of meditative practice. Together these tools are vital in helping overcome and even eliminate anger and destructive emotions. Most importantly, these tools capitalize on what is best about human beings; our social nature, our potential for compassion, and our ability to overcome the anger and everyday afflictions of life.

Charlie Cummins MS, LPC is a counselor, consultant, author and speaker with over twenty years experience in helping individuals and organizations. A unique combination of personal and professional skills equips him to present success principles that help people maximize the use of their number one resource - themselves. Mr. Cummins acquired his Master's in Science degree from Georgia State University and doctoral studies in clinical psychology at the Adler School of Psychology in Chicago. Subsequently he has developed health programs on a national level and served as a consultant to Fortune 500 companies. An adventurer whose personal passions include martial arts, sky-diving, and the outdoors, Mr. Cummins is an avid student of Eastern philosophy and spiritual studies. As a presentation leader, these traits and experiences guide his audience in techniques designed to overcome adversity, enhance self-reliance and improve the quality of human life.

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